



From stage to virtual platforms: Ghanaian Theatre Creators in a context of COVID-19

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Abstract

From traditionalism to postmodernism, physical stage theatre has predominated in Ghana and is widely acknowledged in literature. However, virtual theatre appears to have often been invisible in the eyes of academic literature of Ghanaian theatre scholarship. As soon as the COVID-19 pandemic broke out in Ghana, some theatre creators shifted from promotion of stage to virtual theatre productions. Drawing on theories of performance and media system dependency, I explored this predominance of stage to a promotion of virtual platforms to offer insight into the narratives of theatre creators in Ghana, about some of their works that are currently going on in the context of COVID-19. Using the qualitative case study, purposive sampling, key informant interview, observations and online archives, I investigated selected theatre organisations across the country, particularly in the Accra metropolis of Ghana. The results highlight common issues concerning the global effects of the pandemic on creative works and the need to adapt. It also reveals that prior to COVID-19, some theatre creators in the country used to resort to digital platforms, a situation consistent with experiences of many creators of culture in many parts of the world. It also demonstrates the reality of a shift from the predominance of stage to a promotion of virtual platforms in a time of global crisis. Thus, I suggest theatre creators in Ghana adopt proactive media to staying relevant and resilient to reenergise and sustain the theatre industry in Ghana.

Keywords: COVID-19, Digital Space, Technology, Theatre, Virtual Theatre

Introduction

The art of theatre is a vital component of the performing arts. Hence, theatre productions play significant roles in the creative and cultural industry of Ghana, particularly in the socio-cultural, economic, political and environmental development of the country (Asare, 2020; Bello, 2020; Commey, 2018; Nyatuame & Abdallah 2021). The Ghanaian theatre industry prior to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic could be described as being in a fairly vibrant state (Asiedu, 1999; Botwe-Asamoah, 2005; Yankah, 2006) and predominated by physical live stage performances. Prior to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in many parts of the world, creators of culture used to post some of their creations on digital and or virtual platforms such as YouTube and Facebook, among the others. Similarly in Ghana, some of theatre creators continue resorting to the same method under COVID-19 pandemic, revealing that the situation in Ghana prior to the pandemic was not significantly different.

However, since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, Ghanaian theatre creators have been performing more via Facebook, TikTok and other virtual platforms than on physical stage. This reality implies departure from previous reality which is significantly so because the existential threat of the COVID-19 pandemic continues to overwhelm the global community, exposing and challenging, perhaps, the limits of human resilience and innovation. The uncertainties inflicted by the COVID-19 pandemic have assumed a worldwide dimension, impacting all aspects of life and spaces (Ankenbauer, 2020; Branswell, 2020; Communian & England, 2020). The creative and cultural workers (CCWs) in the creative and cultural labour market of the Cultural and Creative Industries (CCIs) have not been spared either (Communian & England, 2020). Theaters, musical dramas, museums, cultural events have been constrained, bringing the inventive exertion and planning of activities to an unexpected end. The social and financial effect on CCIs have been severe and like many others, will require a bailout for its sustainability.

Physical stage theatre has predominated in Ghana and is widely acknowledged in literature. However, virtual theatre

appears to have often been invisible in the eyes of academic literature of Ghanaian theatre scholarship. As soon as the COVID-19 pandemic broke out in Ghana, some theatre creators shifted from promotion of stage to virtual theatre productions. In this paper, I aim to explore predominance of stage to a promotion of virtual platforms to offer insight into the narratives of theatre creators in Ghana in the context of COVID-19. Specifically, the study should thus be considered as exploratory in seeking answers to pertinent issues. The paper, therefore, addresses the following questions: “What common issues are emerging from the global effects of the pandemic on creative works?”; “What media of theatre productions were used by Ghanaian creators prior to the COVID-19 pandemic?”; “How are theatre creators in Ghana using the new technologies in a time of COVID-19?”. The paper will review related literature in order to summarise the conceptual and empirical review to contextualize the study. This is to look at global effects of the pandemic, particularly on creative works and how theatre creators in Ghana have responded to such impacts. It will also aim to understand what constitutes theatre production activities and why new technologies are important, especially in a time of crisis. The review will also examine media of theatre productions in Ghana prior to the COVID-19 pandemic in order to appreciate a shift from predominance of physical stage theatre to a promotion of virtual theatre in a context of COVID-19. To that the paper will depend on applicable methodological processes to justify the relevance of using interpretive case study to explore present knowledge about theatre production activities in Ghana amidst the COVID-19. In this section, I also provide justifications for selecting the Ghanaian experience as a case study. Though I admit the limitations of this present exploratory study in relying heavily on data largely from interview and online sources, the paper, nonetheless, provides insight into the pressing narratives and concerns of COVID-19 research in the global south.

Literature is replete with contributions of the performing arts in areas of socio-cultural, economic, and environmental development (Benish, 2013; Soini & Dessein, 2016) The performing arts, theatre in particular constitutes a significant part

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of the Ghanaian cultural industry and the total economic market (Bello, 2020). The theatre industry plays significant roles in cultural identity formation, knowledge dissemination, and cultural education among others (Adu-Gyamfi, 2012; Hagan et al., 2009; National Commission on Culture, 2004). Hence it is important to explore how such an industry is also fairing in a moment of crisis with the global pandemic. The current study thus explores how theatre creators are adapting to the pandemic. It also explores predominance of stage to a promotion of virtual platforms to offer insight into the situations of theatre creators in Ghana in a context of COVID-19. This has become necessary due to the following reasons. One, literature on Ghanaian theatre creators in a moment of crisis are budding. Also, the current study will broaden the frontiers of emerging issues on the COVID-19 research in the global south and help delve into the Ghanaian situation in order to appreciate world views of theatre creators in a moment of global crisis. This is also to help determine and understand the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on the theatre production activities in Ghana. This is with the view to determining the way forward towards remaining resilient and relevant in a moment of crisis.

In this study, examine the use of digital technology to promote virtual theatre in Ghana. This is vital in that, despite the apparent resilient nature of creative and cultural work within the creative and cultural institutions (CCIs) globally, performing artists and practitioners in Africa, particularly Ghana continue to experience challenges in the sustainability of their art and practice, especially in a moment of crisis with the COVID-19 pandemic. In this section, I review related literature in order to place the study in context by exploring ways in which current dynamics amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, and digital technology impact works of Ghanaian theatre workers. Particularly, I review related literature on the current state of the use of digital theatre to support the works of theatre workers in Ghana. Importance is placed on factors influencing use of virtual theatre, digital platforms available for Ghanaian theatre workers, and challenges characterizing emergent innovations with the use of virtual theatre in a time of crisis. I wrap

up with a discussion of the theories upon which the study is grounded. In the current state of the literature, there is almost no study devoted to the African cultural creators in a time of COVID-19. The current study thus have potential to become a significant contribution to the literature.

Theatre creators and new technologies in a time of COVID-19

Works on digital performance such as Kuksa (2009); Remshardt (2008) and Masura (2007) among the others have explored the global use of digital technology. These studies also revealed that new approaches to theatre practice, culture and business have already been established. This has advanced traditional methods of theatre practice and services towards a more visually enhanced experience, which is especially important for practicing and extending the frontiers of the technical world of theatre or scenography (Kuksa, 2009). In this paper, I examine the role of multimedia and digital theatre within the field of cultural and creative work (CCW), with particular focus on the innovative interventions introduced to promote virtual theatre design and productions amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. I discuss various digital applications and technological platforms that have transformed the way theatre services are created, produced, and experienced in Ghana. I explore challenges confronting theatre creators in their bid to adapt to the pandemic and use technological platforms to sustain their practice.

“...[L]ife and theatre have much in common...that neither stands still,” opines Cassady (2006, p. 15). In recent years, the art and practice of theatre has experienced tremendous innovation and evolution by means of the application of new technology. Theatre is constantly changing and this, perhaps, in part explains why digital technology is becoming more and more important in theatre. (Cassady, 2006). There are diverse approaches in theatre and new technology, specifically digital media, is one of the reasons for change in theatre experiences globally. Therefore, in this section, I discuss digital technology and how it is influencing a shift from stage theatre to promotion of virtual theatre platforms amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

Global effects of the pandemic on creative works

The social, environmental and financial effects of the pandemic on the creative arts in general and theatre in particular are grave (Abdallah, 2020; Ankenbauer, 2020; Communian & England, 2020). One of the recent studies on COVID-9 pandemic in relation to the world of creative and cultural work in Ghana is Abdallah's (2020) investigation of how innovation and digital space impact public health education amidst the pandemic in Ghana. The key findings of this research demonstrate that theatre workers responded to the call for all Ghanaians to contribute to the fight against the pandemic vis-à-vis the social, financial, and infrastructural challenges they are facing. Therefore, creative artists in Ghana embraced a shift from physical stage theatre to the promotion of virtual theatre platforms to complement efforts of front liners, particularly in the course of public health education on the pandemic. One of the strong arguments of Abdallah (2020) is directed at governments, state authorities, and policy makers to recognize the essential role creative artists could play in the collective fight of Ghanaians against the COVID-19 pandemic.

Again, Communian & England (2020) expose the precarity of cultural and creative work in the UK. Though the situations explored are not in the Ghanaian context, this study, nonetheless, revealed common issues, particularly endemic, systemic, and structural challenges facing the cultural and creative industry globally, especially so in developing cultural economies like Ghana in the global south. The authors thus recommend the resilience discourse to connect with sustainable development efforts of the sector as well as make creative work demographics visible. As revealed in Abdallah's (2020) work, the Ghanaian situation with respect to financial and infrastructural challenges cannot be overestimated. Hence, the findings from the study of Communian & England (2020) could be practically applied to the Ghanaian situation for the necessary lessons to be derived.

Media of theatre productions

Ankenbauer (2020) investigated the experience of independent theatres in the United States of America in the light of how online

theatre could be explored to support theatre work online in times of public health crisis like the pandemic, where face-face interactions are challenged due to restrictions on physical and social distancing. Again, Ankenbauer's work has implications for theatre workers in Ghana. This is in terms of examining how artists could embrace new technology and the digital public space as to reach out to theatre patrons at home. The purpose is to explore the potential of technology and online spaces for the sustainability of theatre works amidst the COVID-19. The findings of Ankenbauer's work also resonate with the call in the 21st century to adopt and rely on new technologies to boost productivity in all spheres of life. The importance of this advocacy is still relevant for creative works like theatre in order to help migrate offline audiences to online spaces with the use of digital technology.

In support, Young (2020) observed some people of South Africa in terms of how they pursue leisure amidst the COVID-19. The findings of the study revealed that "technology was embraced to connect with others and to pursue leisure activities" (p. 1). So the role and place of technology in helping people to cope amidst the pandemic is brought to the fore to draw attention to the potential of applying digital technology in our everyday life. And the fact that digital technology could help improve productivity and our ways of life makes technology all the more so relevant, especially in this moment of crisis with the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, theatre creatives need to adapt and be innovative in order to be resilient (Abdallah, 2020; Ankenbauer, 2020; Branswell, 2020; Coker, 2020). Ghanaian creative artists in general and theatre workers in particular would do well to examine proper ways in which they could incorporate digital technology in their work and practice, before, during and post the pandemic.

Theoretical foundation

The study draws from theories of performance, and media system dependency (Auslander 2008, 2005, 1999; Bhattacharyya, 2020; Hindman, 2004; Phelan, 1993; Riffe, 2008). The significance of these theories lies within the context of the present global pandemic. This has resulted in the recognition and application of

new technology as innovative strategies to adapt to the pandemic. This is also to facilitate and sustain the practice of theatre at all times, even in moments of crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic. So, I explored this shift of predominance of stage to a promotion of virtual platforms to offer insight into the narratives of theatre creators in Ghana, about some of their works that are currently going on in the context of COVID-19.

Owing to the exigencies of the global pandemic, the digital revolution, and the influence of digital technology and new media resulting in digital performance, performance theory perspectives of Philip Auslander and Peggy Phelan have been employed alongside media system dependency theory discussions in this paper. Unlike Schechner's (2000) perspective that discusses performance theory from the sociological perspective, Auslander and Phelan's positions on performance theory seem to be more concerned about issues (status of reality and liveliness), especially as regards art and technology nexus. To this end, Balme (2008) focuses on the Auslander-Phelan debate about theatre and performance in relation to reality and liveliness with or without the intrusion of digital technology. Balme thus reports that while Auslander "refers to human beings in situations of face-to-face communication, usually without technical mediation", Phelan "is inextricably linked to the rise of digital technology and the promises, among other things, of digitally enhanced or, depending on your ideological position, degraded versions of reality." (p. 83) According to Balme, for Auslander, the audiences' desire for immediacy and technology's ability to fulfil this desire is the thrust of his work. Going beyond the traditional view of live theatrical performance, Auslander (2008) sheds light on interactive technologies and their impact on live performances, resulting in the rise and evolution of technologically mediated performances. In exploring concept of liveliness in the 21st century, and the relationships between live and technologically mediated forms of performance, Auslander raises questions such as: "Is liveness an objective characteristic of performances?... [and What is the] fate of live performance", (p. 117). Phelan (1993), on the other hand, is preoccupied with issues bordering on new perspectives on the relationship between

performance and the technical media. According to Balme (2008), “the relationship between the live and the mediated is far less confrontational in artistic practice than it is in academic discourse” (p. 85).

In discussing the performer in the space of technology, Causey (1999) argues that “There is nothing in cyberspace and the screened technologies of the virtual that has not been already performed on the stage. The theatre has always been virtual, a space of illusory immediacy” (p. 383). The thrust of Causey’s (1999) study is on the ontology of performance and the nature of liveliness. In challenging the Auslander-Phelan debate on performance theory in relation to digital performance, Causey suggests that “the ontology of performance (liveness), which exists before and after mediatization, has been altered within the space of technology” (p. 384). For Phelan, the phenomenon of performance is defined through its non-reproducibility and the nature of performance deteriorates as it is enfolded in technological reproduction. Auslander, however, argues that the live performance or theatre as it were should be regarded as a product of recording media. Hence, the liveness exists not as a prior condition, but as a result of mediatization. However, Causey (1999) regards such positions as problematic in that while Phelan disregards any effect of technology on performance and draws a non-negotiable, essentialist border between the two media, Auslander draws out a sophisticated legal argument whose dynamic materialism overlooks the most material manner of marking the live, namely death. Regardless, to the extent that Auslander and Phelan’s perspectives highlight issues of performance reality, liveliness, and mediation in relation to the technological influence, performance theory offers a suitable frame to appreciate and analyse theatre performances via mediated spaces in a time of crisis.

Further, the evolving liberalisation and globalisation of the world communication system, free flow of goods and services, advanced technology and changing trends in behaviour of arts audiences pose threats to the existence of live forms of the performing arts (Bello, 2020). This will give rise to digital performance products, systems, and theories. According to Dixon

(2007), technological trends and artistic incorporation of new media into the performing arts seems to be driving the digital technological world of performances. In tracing the historical lineage of digital performance, Dixon notes that “Throughout the centuries, theatre has been quick to recognize and utilize the dramatic and aesthetic potentials of new technologies” (p. 39). This has expanded discourses on concepts of digital technologies, particularly such as multimedia performance (theatre) (Cassady, 2006), digital media, body and or virtual bodies, space, time, and social and performance theories of theatre. Dixon further notes that the revolution of digital technologies have thus become global revolution, and their influence on the arts, aesthetics, creativity, and culture has been no less revolutionary, significantly affecting processes and products from film and television production to creative writing and the visual and performing arts” (p. 157). Little wonder that new media technologies and their application in theatre practice (production/performance and delivery media) have increasingly engaged critics and scholars of art, theatre and performance studies. The computer offers unique modes of artistic/theatrical expression and a network of interactive performance in cyberspace and screen technologies of the virtual (Dixon, 2007). The computer (internet and technological platforms) are used as agents of experimentation/rethinking/adaptability of artistic forms and strategies (Dixon, 2007). In the process, digital technologies could be contextualized as social, cultural, and artistic modes of expression resulting in “a rethinking of artistic and communication techniques and paradigms” (Dixon, 2007), p. 37. The conjunction of art, performance, technology, and new media is thus brought to bear to explore digital theatrical performances in Ghana in a time of the COVID-19 pandemic.

As the second theory employed to guide discussions in this paper, media system dependency theory (Bhattacharyya, 2020; Hindman, 2004; Riffe, 2008) basically explores ways in which people largely depend on the new media to produce and or deliver their services. The extent to which theatre creators in Ghana are exploring online digital media via technological platforms to deliver their creative offerings to their audiences and viewers is thus

brought to the fore for an examination of the Ghanaian case in the context of COVID-19. Thus, the attempt in this paper is to first, explore and identify the key Ghanaian theatre creators in response to the COVID-19, in the light of a promotion of virtual theatre amidst the pandemic.

Thus, the earlier review of related literature of conceptual and empirical studies on digital technology, virtual/online theatre, creative artists and the pandemic, among others will help to situate the context of the Ghanaian case to guide the data analysis and ensuing arguments.

Methods and procedures

The design for the study was interpretive case study, employed to explore role of theatre creators in using new technologies to contribute to sociopolitical awareness in a time of crisis. The case study was justified by the effort to explore the theatre industry in Ghana concerning the increasing importance of appropriating technology to be innovative to sustain theatre business, particularly in times of crisis to adapt to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the global economy (Communian & England, 2020). The case study employed the interpretive method of research to collect and analyse data, bordering on the views of artists and practitioners regarding the technological interventions introduced to sustain theatre business amidst the COVID-19 pandemic Ghana.

Participants

The study selected seasoned (active) theatre organisations (performing arts companies, performers, artists, practitioners) across the country, particularly in the Accra metropolis of the Greater Accra region of Ghana. The following performing arts (theatre) companies and organisations – Globe Theatre, Roverman Production, Clint Suarez, Foster Romanus Production, were purposively selected due to their level of experience and influence, particularly their art and practice in terms of the specific performing art form - theatre under study within the general creative and cultural institution (CCI) framework in the creative economy of Ghana and Africa. Some of the artists and performers in the

companies participated in the study. A total of six (6) participants were available for the study. This is because they were among the most experienced and influential in the companies in question and directly involved in the daily activities of their groups or organisations at the time of the study. The selected participants may be described as experienced practitioners since they had been practising their art with their respective companies for a minimum of five (5) years and a maximum of thirty (30) years. The six participants participated in the interview sessions about how their production houses are adapting technological innovations to the existential threat posed by the COVID-19 pandemic in an effort to sustain themselves in the theatre business in Ghana.

Research Instrument

Due to restrictions on physical and social gatherings, the participants were interviewed via the phone at one stage or the other during the period of the study. Data was also collected from online sites in that because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the study considered online searches of videos to complement the phone interview data. The interview arrangement was a semi-structured interview guide enabling all the participants respond to the same set of basic questions.

To minimise any form of biases, the participants at Globe Production, Roverman Production, Clint Suarez Production, Foster Romanus Production, in Accra and the Cultural Centre in Kumasi in the Ashanti region of Ghana were given the opportunity to respond to the same set of basic questions. The responses, observations and online documents and or archives of the organisations of the participants were subsequently related to broader concerns. However, the newly emerging issues from the interviews and observations were further probed in the course of my interactions with one participant to the other.

Data Analysis

The interview responses of each participant, based on how their theatre companies, organisations or groups are adapting to the COVID-19 pandemic through the use of innovative technological

interventions in order to sustain themselves in business. The views of the participants were subsequently transcribed and coded, guided by Saldana's (2015) coding and analysis methods for qualitative inquiries, resulting in the identification of indicators, markers and patterns/features in the data. Further meanings were then derived from the views expressed by the participants. Subsequently, themes were developed on the basis of the emergent meanings derived from the explanations of the participants, which were analysed and subsequently discussed.

Results and Discussion

The results highlight common issues concerning the global effects of the pandemic on creative works and the need to adapt. It also reveals that prior to COVID-19, some theatre creators in the country used to resort to digital platforms, a situation consistent with experiences of many creators of culture in many parts of the world. It also demonstrates the reality of a shift from the predominance of stage to a promotion of virtual platforms in a time of global crisis. The research questions sought to explore the shift of predominance of state to online/virtual theatre forms amidst the global pandemic, leading to three (3) themes or categories as were identified in the qualitative interviews, namely:

- a. Common issues emerging from the global effects of the pandemic on the creative work;
- b. Media of Ghanaian theatre productions;
- c. Promotion of virtual theatre in a time of global crisis.

Emerging concerns from the global effects of the pandemic on the creative work

From the foregoing findings, it is encouraging to note that Ghanaian theatre workers saw the value in embracing the impact of innovation and the digital technological space to support public health education on the COVID-19 pandemic and also to reach out to their patrons and fan base. Regardless of the benefits of embracing online or virtual theatre, the sustainability of this new technological influence has been brought into question due to prevailing challenges associated with it. Evidently, funding,

network problems, high cost of data, monetization of online platforms, online insecurity, limited and inadequately resourced virtual studios among others emerged as some of the issues hindering sustenance of virtual theatre practices of Ghanaian theatre workers. Without doubt, the need to adjust and adapt online sources to promote creative offerings of theatre workers come at a cost. Since the demands of the times would influence the practice of theatre, artists and practitioners have no choice but to brace up for this wind of change. As such, a participant from Globe Production in Accra sought to challenge creative artists to have a rethinking about how they practice their art and craft, noting that:

We need to think innovative to free ourselves from the usual traditional way of production. So, it's more about how we can adapt, tune our minds to the fact that theatre is still relevant, keep theatre going. You lecturers should also accept that there is a new era. We feel that this era has taught us that we should not let theatre fade. Doing so, we want to maintain all the protocols. (Participant 5, Globe Production)

Concerning prevailing issues associated with online theatre, a participant, in a phone interview, claimed that, "Cost of data in West Africa is still very high and not consistently affordable for the normal citizen. Security of one's content is challenged consistently". (Participant 4, Roverman Production). Questioned about the relevance of virtual theatre regardless of its associated challenges, another participant from Roverman Production in Accra, intimated that:

Interestingly you need to push hard, else you would not get people to watch, though its free, you still have to push hard to get people to watch, else what have you achieved at the end of the day? Also, is rehearsals, you need to make sure you adhere to the existing protocols, that your actors are tested and declared covid-19 negative to make sure it's safe to work. (Participant 6, Accra)

The precarious nature of creative and cultural work has long engaged attention of many scholars, researchers, and practitioners worldwide. In the same vein, participant 1, in highlighting existing problems characterizing CCIs in general and theatre workers in particular in Ghana, noted thus:

The challenge continues to be funding. When we have access to funding, we can refresh and pay our staff well to become motivated enough for the good job they are doing. Book recording studio for longer hours of studio rehearsals and productions and also buying media slot for adequate airplay. The funding challenges can be best resolved through government intervention and private sector or corporate partnerships and sponsorships. (Participant 1, Kumasi).

The call for all hands-on deck to adequately address persistent problems challenging sustainability of creative and cultural work to improve the welfare and precarious working conditions of CCWs within the CCIs, prior to and post the pandemic, is thus brought to the fore to throw the challenge to all stakeholders concerned.

From the foregoing, it is clear that creative artists in general and Ghanaian theatre workers in particular continue to support front liners to contribute meaningfully to the battle of the pandemic. These they did by applying theatre to augment efforts of other stakeholders to confront the existential threat of the pandemic since the fate of humanity hangs in the balance. Though Ghanaian theatre workers have adopted the use of digital space to entertain, educate and inform the people of Ghana on the COVID-19 protocols, these do not come without challenges.

The findings on the prevailing challenges characterizing virtual theatre forms in Ghana resonate with the claims of Communion & England (2020). Using qualitative reflective meta-analysis, the study explored the precarious nature of creative and cultural workers (CCWs) in general (albeit in the UK).

Notwithstanding, the findings have implications for the prevailing conditions of theatre workers in Ghana, in particular. On this premise, Communion & England advance the argument as to whether COVID-19 is symbolic of a moment of crisis for creative and cultural institutions (CCIs) within the global creative economy or simply exposing the ever-precarious challenges associated with creative and cultural work in general. The need for policy and policy making for a rethinking about the CCIs in order to adequately address the precarious nature of creative and cultural work in general is thus brought to the fore to emphasize that the experience with virtual theatre forms are equally laden with challenges.

Reasons for promoting virtual theatre in a time of global crisis

All hands-on deck

The extracts from the interviews highlight the desire of the participants (theatre workers, artists) to heed the call for all hands-on deck. Many of the accounts given by the participants show that they share the view that the frontliners (health workers in general) of the pandemic are exposed to hazards that place them in danger of infection. However, non-health workers might take part in the fight at the frontline by reaching the communities to educate the individuals on the observance of the protocols suggested.

Role of artists (theatre workers) in public health education on the pandemic

Evidence from the participants support the view that artists do not just entertain, but also contribute to the psychological and physical well-being of individuals especially during these turbulent times where movements and physical contacts are restricted. This pandemic is not just a disease or health crisis but an albatross on the neck of governments, families, private entities, students, and industry players. Our contributions come in different forms, and there is the need to respect and appreciate the various professions and their roles to champion this collective call. Asked about what motivations inspire them to adopt new technologies to contribute

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to sociopolitical awareness raising about the pandemic, participant 5 noted thus:

I understand that the arts and entertainment are vital to the development of the soul and emotions of a people and especially in these times with insecurities and heightening anxieties, the need for entertainment is more rive. I look at the amount of content being churned out on social media and I ask myself why not ours?

The COVID-19 fight hinges on protocols like social distancing, hand washing with soap under running water, no mask no entry policies and stay at home campaigns to reduce the spread. And so, the perspectives of artists offer innovations to support the fight against the pandemic through publication health education by means of the arts in general and theatre in particular. This is to bring to the fore the role of artists in public health education on the COVID-19 pandemic in Ghana. The participants easily explicated their intents as artists in the collective effort to confront the pandemic and adjust to the new normal inflicted by the pandemic. A playwright and director from the Cultural Centre in the city of Kumasi in Ghana observed that:

The passion for the arts and creative spirit to respond to the exigencies of COVID-19. Inasmuch as the stage is dark due to COVI-19, as P.T. Barnum famously said, “the show must go on”. As creatives, we’re unprepared as the coronavirus pandemic came unannounced. With so much myths, misinformation and disinformation going on, and the citizenry also desperate for news and coverage of the current situation, as a theatre worker, I have to come in with an infotainment radio drama for public service broadcast to help rekindle public information on the pandemic. (Participant 1, Personal Interview).

Short skits have been on circulation on social media and digital technological platforms such as Whatsapp, YouTube,
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Instagram, Facebook, Tiktok, radio, mostly. In a personal interview with this Clemento Suarez to describe how his theatre (comedy shows) is adapting to the Covid-19 pandemic, he acknowledged that:

Theatre has greatly been affected by the pandemic because for a complete theatre show you need an audience. However, technology has made it possible for us to record performances so there are videos and sometimes live streaming. We have so far tried showing past performances and streaming live shows. All have been successful and so I think the adaptation to this pandemic has a green light.

My findings indicate that theatre workers saw the need to respond to the call for all hands-on deck. This they did by means of appropriating theatre as a tool to support public health education on the pandemic. This confirms the position of Abdallah (2020) that it is crucial for governments to consider and engage creative artists to play a vital role in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. In confirmation, the findings of Ankenbauer's (2020) investigation into independent theatres in the United States of America supports the claim that theatre has the strategy to foster contribution in an unforeseen public health crisis like the pandemic in person interactions are no longer possible.

Media of Ghanaian theatre productions

Certainly, some Ghanaian creatives used to employ the virtual space to deliver their creative products. This is done through educative dramatic video recordings on social issues mostly targeted at patrons. Mostly, the technological platforms used are social media in that they help to go viral. By means of social media, such creatives have engaged their patrons and fan base in order to sustain their relationship with their patrons. Such artists found such unique ways to broaden their visibility, and develop their brand. In support of the above view, Foster Romanus, another established comedian in the city of Accra, noted in an interview that:

...We used to go virtual before, too, once in a while before the covid due to the demand from fans, to sustain their interest so we can also continue to stay relevant. (Participant 3, Accra)

Clearly, digital technology and the internet have provided opportunities for theatre creators to sustain and or widen their audience base. Fittingly, many theatre workers saw the potential in adapting to the digital space to reach out to their patrons and sustain themselves in business, even prior to the upsurge of the pandemic. Little wonder that the use of the technological platform to sustain theatre work and marketing amidst the pandemic engaged attention of some theatre workers in Ghana. A participant from one of the most successful private theatre companies in Ghana recently, Roverman Production, admitted that:

We've had to resort to online channels as best as we can. We have been producing radio theatres since the onset of the pandemic. Since we cannot bring people together for a viewing, we can at least reach them through hearing, mainly technology – social media. We currently stream a free show once each month via YouTube and thereafter the play moves to our website as video on demand on www.rovermanproductions.com/Home/Videos. People are advised to stay home, hence we need to reach them in the comfort of their homes. (Participant 4, Roverman Production)

Notably, Roverman Production in Ghana is acclaimed for its commitment to the Ghanaian theatre industry by keeping to their determination to sustain the stage play experiences in Ghana by striving to produce a play devotedly each quarter of the year. The intent is to contribute greatly to sustain the theatre culture of the Ghanaian creative space to boost the creative labour market for up-and-coming artists but mostly importantly to impact the socio-cultural, political and economic lives of the people of Ghana. Little wonder they had to embrace the online space to sustain their

productions, mostly via Facebook, YouTube and Instagram. Clearly, theatre workers in Ghana have resorted to the digital public sphere in order to engage their audiences and patrons online and by extension sustain their art of theatre amidst the COVID-19 period. The above findings reflect views of Ankenbauer's (2020) that it is proper to rely on technologies to facilitate new forms of interactions that were not available offline in order to migrate offline theatre community to online settings. Similarly, the findings affirmed the views of Young (2020) about leisure pursuits of people in South Africa during the COVID-19 in averring that "technology was embraced to connect with others and to pursue leisure activities" (p. 1).

Conclusions

So far, I have considered ways in which theatre creators in Ghana resorted to a promotion of virtual theatre amidst the COVID-19 pandemic by means of exploring new technologies toward delivery of their products in a context of the COVID-19 pandemic. By so doing, there emerged a shift from predominance of stage theatre to a promotion of virtual theatre. In the process, there emerged a shift from the predominance of stage to a promotion of virtual platforms amidst the pandemic. This was done by means of the following: dramatic works and videos, short dramatic skits, short musical videos online, and radio theatre.

Clearly, technology-based approaches can benefit the whole process of theatre making and production, not only through exploration of traditional media and physical spaces but also by transforming the conventional approaches of theatre making, production and consumption. I explore opportunities offered by digital technology and relatively new media communication platforms such as the internet and new technologies, and assess their impact on provision of theatre services in times of crisis in Ghana. Also, I argue that digital technology, especially computer-mediated approaches should be carefully considered to sustain theatre business in times of crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic.

The evidence from this paper suggests that one of the main concerns that presently exist in virtual theatre practices in Ghana is

the issue of how convenient, presentable, accessible, and marketable new technologies and digital communication platforms are for theatre organisations, and practitioners to sustain themselves in business amidst the pandemic. Indeed, the use of such online delivery media such as trending technological platforms like the YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, social media, and community radio, has enabled sustainability and promoted branding and monetisation for theatre workers.

In all, it is acknowledged that vibrant virtual theatre culture in Ghana is dependent on complex negotiations. Therefore, sustenance of online theatre in Ghana needs to be supported by driving mechanisms that grant visibility to particular kinds of user-generated content. This will account for how and why online theatre could be able to flourish in Ghana.

Recommendations

Theatre creators in Ghana should see opportunity in digital technology and adopt proactive media to staying relevant and resilient to reenergise and sustain the theatre industry in Ghana, even in moments of crisis. The government, policy makers, media institutions, technological platforms and innovative artists have pivotal roles to play in shaping Ghanaian theatre culture on-and offline. This would support new practices of theatre creators in our collective effort to sustain the ever-evolving Ghanaian theatre culture within the global creative economy. Theatre creatives in particular should see new opportunities in the technological digital revolution concerning emergence, evolution, and maturation of the most creative digital cultures. Technological platforms marking trends in internet use in relation to theatre production on-and offline should be promoted and encouraged to flourish and be vibrant in the digital space in Ghana.

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